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FEASTS IN NEW IRELAND; THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF EATING[1]

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121 EATING has an important social function among any people. Groups of people eating together on a particular occasion, whether it be a mortuary feast in a primitive society or a birthday dinner party in our own culture, illustrate the point that eating is a social institution as well as an individual physiological necessity. In the primitive society of New Ireland, social life in its ritual, and in many of its non-ritual aspects also, centered around feasts. This term includes not only those occasions when food is eaten communally, but also when it is only distributed, and in this paper denotes any communal rite (and non-ritual occasion) centering around food. The two most important communal events are dances and feasts. Only the latter are being considered in this paper.

Social Function of Eating

The communal eating of food and customs concerning it may be said to have a double social function: (1) to maintain the cohesion of the society and of groups within it; (2) to determine, in part, the relation of the individual to the society and to the smaller groups within it. The psychological theory underlying the first function is that society maintains its existence by a system of sentiments which are given collective expression on ritual occasions.[2] In this society the most frequent of these are feasts.

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[1] This article is based on an ethnological study of a Melanesian society on the island of New Ireland in the Bismarck Archipelago. The author lived for ten months in the village of Lesu (phonetic spelling; the spelling on government maps is Lossu) on the east coast about eighty miles from the northern end of the island, and attempted a rather intensive study of a relatively small group of people, one linguistic unit of five villages each with a population of between two and three hundred, covering an area of ten or twelve miles. The research was conducted under the auspices of the Australian National Research Council, and the author is now preparing the material for publication as a Fellow of the National Research Council (United States), under the sponsorship of Dr. Clark Wissler.

[2] Professor Radcliffe-Brown has expounded this theory in The Andaman Islanders (Cambridge, 1922). He says pp. 233, 234: "(1) A society depends for its existence on the presence in the minds of its members of a certain system of sentiments (an organized system of emotional tendencies centered about some object) by which the conduct of the individual is regulated in conformity with the needs of the society. (2) Every feature of the social system itself and every event or object that in any way affects the well-being or the cohesion of the society becomes an object of this system of sentiments. (3) In human society the sentiments in question are not innate but are developed in the individual by the action of the society upon him.

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Members of the society come together at a feast to welcome a new member, to mourn the loss of an old one, to mark a change in the social status of the individual through circumcision, menstruation, or marriage, to note the return to the society of a member after a temporary withdrawal through illness, and before a communal enterprise such as war. Should there be a rift occasioned by a quarrel, it is the coming together over food that mends it.[3] On all these occasions society manifests its unity. While the rites vary according to the event, food is a common denominator of all of them.

The feast provides not only an opportunity for the society to express collectively those sentiments which maintain its existence, but it also serves more concretely as the occasion for the transaction of much of the business and social (apart from ritual) life of the community. It is at the feasts that trade is carried on. Payments are made for objects and services, and future trading operations are arranged. On the same occasion individuals and groups exchange gifts. A feast also frequently becomes a meeting where matters of importance are discussed. Finally, it is a sociable occasion for both sexes, when jokes and gossip are exchanged.

The second function affects the relation of the individual to his group and the relation between several individuals. The native's explanation of why he gives a feast is that he must do so to gain prestige. Rather does he put it in a negative way, that, unless he gives a feast on any of the occasions which demand one, he will be a person of no account: everyone will talk about him in a derogatory fashion, saying that he has no food or wealth, and is not able to give a feast. To a native this kind of gossip is most noxious; a lowering of his prestige must be avoided at any cost, and the number and the size of the feasts he gives are most important in affecting his position.

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(4) The ceremonial customs of a society are a means by which the sentiments in question are given collective expression on appropriate occasions. (5) The ceremonial (i.e., collective) expression of any sentiment serves both to maintain it at the requisite degree of intensity in the mind of the individual and to transmit it from one generation to another."

Professor Radcliffe-Brown has applied this theory to Andaman society and has described the various ritual occasions in the Andaman society which serve to maintain and strengthen these sentiments. He has not, however, applied his theory or mentioned it in connection with feasts. His theory of the social value of food is that "food is a possession of the society, that not only the power to obtain food, but also the power to use it without danger is something that the individual owes to society, and that the bestowal upon him of this power involves the acceptance on his part of corresponding obligations" (p. 278). This theory deals with the social value of food itself and how society overcomes the danger resulting from the social value. The above article is concerned with quite a different aspect, namely, the social function of eating.

[3] This is just the final mark that the quarrel is over. Preceding the feast there is an exchange of 'ꞩaɾγ (currency) between the two disputants.

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574 Around food also is focused much of the prestige of an individual in his
554 family. Here a man's standing is largely dependent upon his ability as a
586 food provider and the woman's upon her industry in preparing the food. Failure on the part of either partner to fulfill these obligations is sufficient cause for a divorce.

Social Organization

61 Before describing the feasts and showing the way in which much of life centers around food, it is necessary to give a very brief description of the essentials of the social organization. There are two exogamous moieties, the Eagle and the Hawk, which are subdivided into clans. Descent is matrilineal, the clan consisting of an extended family, all related through the female line. The next kinship unit in order of size is the individual family, which may be monogamous, is frequently polygamous, and occasionally polyandric.

62 On the basis of locality the largest unit is the village. In the district where I lived there are five villages forming one linguistic unit. This is not and never has been, as far as I could observe, a political unit. In the past, [721] warfare was frequent between the villages and there neither was nor is one chief for all of them, each having its own. The village is subdivided into [591] hamlets,—Lesu into fifteen. Residence is matrilocal and so a hamlet will usually have many female members of the same clan. The hamlet has from two to seven or eight houses, each one having its communal cooking ground [764] and generally a cook house also, for use on rainy days. With the exception of the very small ones, a hamlet has its own cemetery and men's house.

105 The society is agricultural. Gardening, fishing, hunting wild pigs, and cooking are the main everyday occupations. Trading is important and carried on according to exact and traditional rules. The familiar Melanesian gift-exchange is also practiced.

Frequency of Feasts

527 After living in this society for only a short time, one is impressed by the
574 great frequency of feasts. The following is a list of occasions on which they are held.

Occasion	Name
Pregnancy	ɑnɪng asɪl tsɛgɣ (eating for infant)
Birth	Grɪmɣsi (name of dance performed by women at this rite)
Giving name to infant	Basisis (name)
Several months after birth if infant is strong	ɑnɪng asɪl wɐtwɐt tsegɣ (eating for strong infant)

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At appearance of first tooth	ɑnɪng asɪl nuji (eating for tooth)
After ritual washing of a girl at her first menstruation	tsɪ tsɪl (name of leaf used in washing)
Marriage	mɑrɪl (name of playful fighting occurring between women of opposite moieties at this time)
Circumcision	Lual ɪnɣ tsɛ saukɣ (feast for cutting penis)
Recovery from illness	Bis Bambull ɣ (make taro die[4])
Going away a long distance	ɑnɪng atɣbasiɣɑp (eat and go)
Feast at death	Kosɛrɣlualɣlualɣlual

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After death feasts 32
Nineteen of this number were connected with the display of malanggons.
Circumcision rites[8] 8
In payment for economic services 5
These were to repay workers who had built a house or made a garden fence.
Women's feasts 11
Those at which the women eat or where the food is distributed to them. The latter is the more frequent occurrence. The men do not eat at the women's feasts. They may be further analyzed as follows: birth, 4; pregnancy, 1; circumcision, 1; menstruation, 1; marriage, 1; malanggon,[9] 1; end of dance rehearsals, 1; payment to women who had helped a sick woman of opposite moiety, 1.
Miscellaneous feasts 20
These are subdivided as follows: abundance of some particular food, 9; baby cutting his first tooth, 1; giving of name to infant, 1; recovery from illness, 2; settlement of quarrel, 1; because infant is strong, 1; for possible mates of infant, 1; end of folk-tale telling period, 1; for my departure, 1; for my servant's departture, 1; just sociability, 1.

At the far end of the village, other minor feasts probably occurred which I did not record or witness. The number of people attending ranged from twenty to five hundred.

Preparations for a Feast

Preparing for a feast is a communal enterprise. Early in the morning of the feast, or the day before if it is a big one, the women of the hamlet, village, or several villages, depending on the size of the feast, bring their taro to the communal cooking ground or cook house.[10] They and the girls old enough to be of assistance immediately begin the work of scraping and preparing the taro to be baked. Their only implement is a shell called 'sip, with which they scrape the skin from the taro. The scraped taro is then wrapped in leaves. The women are quite ingenious in cooking, and there are a number of ways in which this general method is varied. Shredded coconut may be added, or the taro may be cut in a certain manner, or the inside may be scooped out, etc. The women sit in a group on the ground, working busily and seriously. A few men are off on one side tending to the liga, a pile of hot stones on which the food is to be baked. A fire is made to heat the

[8] At these circumcision rites malanggons were displayed. So the rites really had a double function—mortuary and circumcision.

[9] Men ate at this feast, too, but separately from the women.

[10] The principal foods are taro, fish, crabs, pigs, bananas, coconuts, and pawpaws, supplemented by yams, sago, turtle, etc. Taro is the staple article of diet, and its preparation is the main work both of family meals and feasts.

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stones, and when these are hot they are leveled and the food put between them. Leaves and sand are then put over it, and the food remains there until it is baked. Men are working in groups of two or three, but not very continuously, wrapping a fish or a pig in leaves preparatory to baking, or bringing in leaves from the bush to wrap around the food. Their work in this connection is never as steady as the women's work. A man may tend to the liga and then loll around for a half hour or more, until there is something else to do. Frequently the men will take care of the babies, while the mothers scrape the taro. The main work of cooking falls upon the women; although the men do assist, this does not break into the sexual division of labor.

When the women have finished preparing the taro (for a big feast this takes at least three or four hours), and after it has been placed in the liga, the ground on which they have been working is cleaned and they take their ease. Until now they have been working seriously and without stopping, except perhaps to nurse a baby. There has been no talking except for the necessary remarks about the taro. Now they sit in the same place smoking their pipes and chatting. Gossip is exchanged, jokes are told and followed with appreciative laughter, and here and there a woman is engaged in the pastime of searching for lice in a friend's or relative's hair. If a woman of the village has just become pregnant, there will be playful fighting between the women of the opposite moieties. This part of the pregnancy rites occurs whenever there is a group of women present. The men in the meantime are a short distance away, on the beach, in the compound in front of the men's house or some other house, in groups of two or three, smoking and chatting but not in any large group. This period—while the food is baking in the liga—is an easy, convivial, feminine communal occasion, as is the eating which follows for the men.

Description of Feast

Three or four hours later, when the food has been baked, the men and boys carry it in their hands into the cemetery. For the men the cemetery serves as a banqueting hall and most of the men's ritual feasts are held there.[11] Women are never permitted in the cemetery for a feast, or at any other time, except at a burial, and then they leave immediately after the interment.[12]

[11] The economic feasts in payment to workers are not always held in the cemetery, and the malanggon ones are held in a special structure erected for them. The connection of eating in the cemetery with mortuary beliefs must be considered at another time.

[12] However, I was invited to all the feasts, and the invitations were always accepted.

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264 574 In the cemetery the food is eaten with traditional etiquette. The men sit on the ground around the sides of the cemetery. At one end is the pile of food and near it the host or hosts. The bundles of food are opened by the host usually, and then it is customary for him to make a speech, explaining the reason for the feast and mentioning those who have contributed food to it. Several young men act as "waiters" and place a banana leaf on the ground in front of each man, or sometimes one leaf for every two or three men. Then the waiters evenly distribute the food on these leaves, each one getting exactly the same number of taro, bananas, etc. A "waiter" takes as many taro as he can hold and puts about three on each leaf and then he takes another lot and distributes them, until they are evenly divided. At a highly ritual feast, which I attended, for the display of malanggons during circumcision rites, ten men acted as waiters, advancing in a line to the pile of food, picking it up in unison, walking to the leaf plates, and then after waiting for a signal from one of the hosts, put the food down at exactly the same moment. The signal was: "Arurini la pɤllɣ" (Put it on ground).

No one ever begins to eat until all the food has been apportioned. At the feast just mentioned a second signal was given for this. The two hosts walked silently the length of the enclosure in which the feast was being held, each holding a small pig's bone. The guests were silent. Then the hosts threw the bones away and the eating started. At less important and less formal feasts this signal is frequently omitted, but even then no one ever eats before the "waiters" have finished their work of distribution. Then the guests eat, but not the host. It would be considered very bad form for a host to eat at his own feast.

Trade after the Feast

437 574 When the men have finished eating, business affairs of varying nature are conducted. If pigs have been eaten at the feast, payment is now made for them. A string of ˈsɛrɣ (shell currency) is held up by the man giving the feast and he says to whom he is paying it and what for. Then the ˈsɛrɣ is handed over to the seller of the pig. Should the occasion be a very big feast at which many pigs were consumed, this payment will usually be made outside the cemetery, where the ˈsɛrɣ can be given to the women owners of the pigs as well as to the men.

Any other payments due are made at this time. Should a man have purchased a dog, he now makes the payment to the former owner. Preparations are also made for future trading arrangements. One feast was held particularly to arrange for the purchase of pigs to be used at malanggon rites ten months later. The people who would sell their pigs for these com-

ing rites were given bundles of baked sago. The chief called out their names and the sago was given to them. This "marked" them as those who would sell pig for the future rites. The names of some women were called, and when the feast was over they came up to the cemetery to get their sago.

Gift Exchange

The feast is not only the time for payments and arrangements for future trading, but also for gifts. Usually not all the pigs are consumed at the feasts, and large portions, a head or half the body, will be presented to some one present. Sometimes this is a return gift for a present of half a pig which had been made six months ago, or perhaps it is a new gift to a man, who will return it at another feast. The gifts are always made ceremonially, the name of the recipient being called, and then the piece of pig is handed to him by one of the "waiters."

Discussion

At the end of the feast other matters of importance and current interest are discussed. If dance rehearsals are in progress, one man will make a speech exhorting the men to dance well and to practice rigorously. Or the chief may map out plans for a coming big feast, that is, when they will bring in the bananas to be buried in the sand,[13] when they will fish, what day the women will prepare the taro, etc. Or perhaps, as happened at one feast I attended, the weather was the subject of discussion. The rainy season (time of northwest monsoon) had begun, and for several weeks there had been a deluge of rain. Everyone was disgusted at having to slide about in the wet mud, and much more serious was the threatened danger to the taro crops. After the men had finished eating, the old and rather famous rain magician, Bullagot, made a long speech, encouraging the men and telling them that the excessive amount of rain was due to the magician of a neighboring village, but that he would counteract this by making his own magic to stop the rain. He was followed by other old men, all making speeches of a similar nature, exhorting people not to be downhearted, saying that Bullagot would stop the rain. The younger men listened and were impressed. It was not unlike a Biblical scene where the ancient prophets encouraged the people in a time of famine or other hardship.

Occasionally a concluding speech is made, although this does not happen very frequently. At the feast to make arrangements for buying the pigs for the future malanggon rites, the chief made a concluding speech, during

[13] Bananas are buried in the sand on the beach about a week previous to a feast. The resulting banana is very soft and squashy.

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537 which he walked up and down singing and talking. He gave once more the
574 reason for the feast, said they had now "marked" all the pigs, and then made a few more remarks about the size of the animals and the number of men present.

[285] Finally, each man makes a rude coconut-leaf basket in which he carries
574 home the remains of his food. But before they leave, the men carefully
764 clean the cemetery and throw all debris into the sea, near which the cemetery is always placed. Not a scrap of food nor any other refuse, such as a leaf "plate," remains, the cemetery being left in the same neat condition
[515] that it was in before the feast. This work done, hands are washed in the sea (the sea as a finger bowl is one of its many uses for the native), and then the men drift away singly or in small groups, each carrying his basket with the remains of the food.

Reciprocity Between Moieties

437 This ritual feast, held on all occasions of importance to the individual or
616 to society, is also frequently the time when the principle of reciprocity be-
574 tween both moieties and localities is seen in full play.

At the feminine feasts, such as pregnancy, birth, first menstruation, and marriage, where there is a distribution of food, the women of the Eagle moiety bring taro which is given to the women of the Hawk moiety, and the women of the Hawk moiety likewise bring taro which in turn is given to the women of the Eagle moiety. This exchange is never omitted. The Eagle women bring their taro, prepare it for baking, and then place it in the liga themselves. They do not forget just where their bundles have been placed. Removing them from the liga, they give them to the women of the Hawk moiety, who do likewise to the women of the Eagle moiety. The taro is of course all exactly the same and prepared in the same fashion, so that one gets exactly what one has given. But it is the ritual exchange between the moieties that is important. At some feasts uncooked taro is exchanged. At the feast, when the men eat, this act of reciprocity does not take place among them: the food is opened up in the cemetery and the taro is distributed regardless of moiety.

Reciprocity Between Villages

437 It is the uncooked taro that is most often the object of exchange be-
574 tween the women of different villages at intervillage feasts—usually mor-
621 tuary and malanggon ones. Sometimes the exchange does not always take place at the one feast. The women of Lesu may go to a feast at Ambwa, three miles away, and receive much taro. At a later time the women of Ambwa will come to a similar feast at Lesu and receive taro as a return gift.

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At other times the exchange may be effected at the same feast. In the same way, men of Libba will eat at a feast at Lesu, and later the Lesu men will eat at a Libba feast. A feast thus provides the occasion when both individuals and groups pay off their obligations.

Feminine Speeches about Husbands

At the ritual feasts of circumcision, birth, and marriage, another custom is given an opportunity for expression. At these feasts it is customary for the women to make speeches about their husbands, as good or bad food-providers. The food is arranged in two piles, one contributed by the Eagle moiety, and the other by the Hawk. The Eagle women come on the scene together, each brandishing a masculine implement of work—a fishing net, a spade, etc. They circle around the pile of food contributed by the Hawk moiety, each woman in turn holding up a tool and making a speech about her husband. If she carries a net, she talks about his industry in fishing and how he very often brings her fish. Or she may say the opposite,—how lazy he is. Each woman makes her speech, and the "audience," male and female, listens to it with quiet appreciation. There are grins and chuckles during a speech about a lazy man, while he hangs his head in shame. When the women of one moiety have finished, the other women enter and go through the same procedure. The speeches show very clearly how much the man's prestige in his family depends upon his ability as a provider of food. These ritual feasts give the women the opportunity of publicly praising or blaming their husbands and they never let it pass by.

Daily Meals

Feasts are of course not the only time when natives eat. When they get up at sunrise, they will eat a cold baked taro left over from the day before. But this is not a meal. The man will often munch his taro as he strolls about the beach, while the woman will eat her's casually as she tidies the house or collects her implements, baskets, etc. to go to the garden. In the middle of the afternoon, when they have returned from the gardens, if hungry, another cold baked taro will be eaten casually. But after the sun has set there is the family meal. The food for this is sometimes prepared by the wife, or wife and daughter together, and at other times the women of the hamlet may cook communally. The baked food is later taken to each individual household. There, in the open compound in front of the house, each family gathers around the fire and partakes of the common meal. Certainly this meal emphasizes the unity of the family and tends to foster those sentiments which hold the family together—just as the feasts keep alive the sentiments binding larger groups.

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Other Customs centering about Food

264 There are various interesting customs which center around food apart from feasts or family meals. These may just be mentioned here as showing the important sociological rôle of food. Betrothal is consummated by the [584] girl preparing some food for the man and their sitting down with the basket of food between them and eating together. In many folk-tales, when we are told that a man and a woman, or a man and two women, sit down and eat together, this expresses the fact that they are married. A woman never eats with her lover.

[754] The remains of food are connected with black magic, and so one is careful never to leave any left-overs about.

[768] Even the ghosts are concerned with food. After a successful fishing expedition a half taro and a small piece of fish is left on the liga for the ghosts of dead clan ancestors whose aid has been asked in fishing magic.

262 The prohibition of certain foods on particular occasions is the essential part of several taboos. The most important of these is the taboo against eating taro for certain relatives of a dead person over a prescribed period of mourning. During pregnancy a woman may not eat a certain fish. This is [843] one with many bones, and it is thought that they would hurt the embryo child. A pregnant woman will be given a half of a baked taro by a woman who has had children. The latter eats the other half, and this act is believed to insure a successful delivery of the infant.

262 Food is the most frequent form of gift between husband and wife,
431 between mother's brother and his nephew or niece, between brother and
574 sister, and between friends. It is also an invariable mark of hospitality to offer food to a stranger.

Social Function

182 From the preceding description it is obvious that feasts in this society
264 have other functions beside the satisfaction of physical hunger. Sometimes
574 there is more than one feast in a day and the men then eat as a duty rather than because they are hungry. One day there were three feasts in near-by hamlets, and all attended by the same men. Two were connected with death rites, and one was to mark the occasion of an infant's cutting his first tooth. By the time the third feast was reached, the men were not hungry, but all ate.

Even the family meal, which has the very definite physiological function of satisfying hunger, has also the sociological rôle of uniting the various members. In a similar way the sentiments binding the society together are given collective expression at the feasts, although the very strong line of sex

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demarcation is observed. The general rule for feasts is that the women cook and the men eat.[14] Now if a communal activity strengthens the cohesion of a group, the division of society into two groups on one occasion emphasizes the solidarity of each group. But since each of the two groups are partaking in the same rite, there is no real loosening of the sentiments which bind the whole society but rather a further integration of it. The same rites thus have a contradictory function, in that at them the society is united and at the same time divided on lines of sex.

Summary

Feasts provide the occasions when the sentiments on which a society depends for its maintenance are given expression. The objects about which these systems of sentiments center are in New Ireland, as we have seen:

1. Important crises in the life history of the individual, such as pregnancy, birth, marriage, death, etc.
2. Trade—payments made for pigs and other things that have been sold.
3. Exchange of gifts between individuals and groups, wherein the important principle of reciprocity functions.
4. The privilege of women to make speeches about their husband's industry.
5. Maintenance of the individual's prestige.

About all of these—trade, gift exchange, reciprocity between moieties, crises in an individual's life, economic relationship between a man and his wife, prestige—systems of emotional tendencies are organized, and it is necessary according to the theory described in the beginning of the paper, for these systems to be maintained, strengthened, and transmitted from one generation to another. Feasts are a form of ritual which thus have the social function of impressing upon the individual the sentiments of his society.

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[14] At seventy-five of the eighty-five feasts I attended, only the men ate.